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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DUSHANBE 000540

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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN: POLITICAL VIGNETTES OF RAHMONOV AND ABDULATIPOV  
AT NAVRUZ EVENTS

CLASSIFIED BY: Richard E. Hoagland, Ambassador, EXEC, Embassy  
Dushanbe.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

#### A LOW-KEY PRESIDENT RAHMONOV BEHAVES

¶1. (C) On March 18, President Rahmonov had his annual meeting with the country's intelligentsia in the newly restored central cinema and then invited them, members of his government, and the diplomatic corps to a formal luncheon in a specially constructed, 250-foot-long, temporary banquet hall in Dushanbe's Botanical Garden. Central Bank Chairman Alimardonov was the major domo, as always for the President's largest banquets, and he set 850 places with new gold-rimmed National Bank of Tajikistan china, made in China (we checked). Although there was traditional music during the interminable meal, there were no song and dance acts afterward. Instead, the President called on five leading poets to recite their poetry. As he was leaving, one famous female poet called out to him to stay and dance. His eyes lit up. But immediately, Rahmonov's chief of security lightly put his hand on the President's shoulder. Looking a tad sheepish, Rahmonov declined and quickly left.

¶2. (C) COMMENT: While we would certainly not judge Rahmonov an alcoholic, he does like to party and, in the past, after a good number of Hennessy XOs, has frequently taken to the dance floor with the ladies and grabbed the microphone to croon songs. At last year's Unity Day banquet, he was more than a little visibly tipsy, and his security detail had to edge him out of the hall. This became a scandal in Dushanbe's political circles, and ever since, we have not seen Rahmonov cut loose in public. END

COMMENT.

¶3. (SBU) The President and his intelligentsia guests were nearly two hours late for the lunch - most unusual for him - and protocol invited the prompt ambassadors to stroll in the Botanical Garden. To our surprise, the Conservatory, a barren ruin since Independence, has been fully restored with a new roof, new glass, and totally replanted with rare specimen plants, further evidence of Dushanbe's physical renaissance.

¶4. (C) Rahmonov was likewise mellow and well behaved at his small VVIP luncheon following Mayor Ubaidulloev's Navruz cultural show on March 21. He offered only one toast, and didn't interact with the entertainers, except to ask that his favorite ones not use a microphone and amplified music, but that they come closer and sing for him personally, which in fact accentuated the magnificent voice of the young Armenian diva. Further, he didn't play one ambassador off against another by pulling one or another aside for a tete-a-tete, as he has in the past.

¶5. (C) That said, the Presidential Protocol Office must have had fun making up the seating chart. The Ambassador and Russian Ambassador Ramazan Abdulatipov were seated side by side at Table Number One within Rahmonov's direct line of sight (see para 10 below). He occasionally made a gesture of offering toasts to the Ambassador and Abdulatipov, but never demanded "bottoms up," as he has done in the past.

¶6. (C) A bit further down in the pecking order, the German and French Ambassadors were seated with the Iranian Ambassador, who looked exceedingly uncomfortable, as he always does at such diplomatic social events where the alcohol flows. (As he often does, the British Ambassador blew off the event.) The Chinese

DUSHANBE 00000540 002 OF 002

Ambassador, oddly enough, was seated back in the nose-bleed section with various United Nations officials.

BONS MOTS FROM AMBASSADOR ABDULATIPOV

¶7. (C) Few ambassadors showed up for Dushanbe Mayor Obaidulloev's March 21 cultural extravaganza to celebrate Navruz. Among those who did was Russian Ambassador Abdulatipov. Protocol seated him in the empty front row of the VVIP stand. After Ambassador Hoagland, seated in the third row (not a sleight, just a fact) went up to greet him, Abdulatipov stood and went back to sit with the Ambassador, quipping that "Russia wants to demonstrate good relations with the Superpower."

¶8. (C) The Ambassador was seated next to one of the many small tables with dried fruits, nuts, and roasted seeds. When he passed the plate, Abdulatipov commented, "The Russian Federation humbly thanks the representative of the United States for providing humanitarian assistance."

¶9. (C) Most of the 21 acts in the program featured dramatic recitation of ancient Persian, pre-Islamic poetry, and traditional music and dance from all regions of Tajikistan. The Ambassador asked Abdulatipov, a native of the North Caucasus, if this was how Dagestanis celebrate Navruz. He replied dryly, "Of course not. We're Europeans." Later, during a riveting traditional drumming and dance number, Abdulatipov nudged the Ambassador, "This music and dance is like your Eskimos, isn't it? Same kinds of traditional peoples." By "traditional" the elegant Abdulatipov really seemed to imply "backward."

¶10. (C) Following the mayor's program, President Rahmonov hosted a relatively small lunch for the diplomatic corps, several key members of his government, and a few other special guests. The Ambassador was seated at Table Number One with Abdulatipov, Foreign Minister Nazarov, the president's chief of staff, and the retired first President of Tajikistan. A half hour after President Rahmonov opened the luncheon with the official toast, a fairly large group of men arrived and noisily pushed together two tables behind the President's head table -

First Family Orion Bank and Tajik Aluminum Plant officials. The Ambassador commented to Abdulatipov, "Now that's really a VIP table," knowing that Russian Aluminum's Oleg Deripaska has very close relations with the key figures in the group. Abdulatipov looked serious and said, "Not VIP. Dangerous!" When the Ambassador asked why, Abdulatipov explained, "They're Tajiks. You can't ever trust them."

¶11. (C) COMMENT: As we get to know Abdulatipov better, we're beginning to appreciate his dry sense of humor. Still, some of his unscripted comments are both revealing and have unexpected (and undiplomatic) bite. END COMMENT.  
HOAGLAND